

Training and teamwork key to 45 years of Navy SEALs

By Petty Officer 2nd Class, Brian P. Biller, Naval Special Warfare Public Affairs

January marked the 45th anniversary of the inception of the SEAL Teams. From those early days of the SEALs to today, it was the intense training and brother-like bond for their teammates that forged the core of the Naval Special Warfare community.

Prior to 1962 there were forces in place which did some of the jobs of the SEALs, many whose roots and manpower were integral in the forming of the first teams.

“The SEALs officially came from the Underwater Demolition Teams, but you can really trace the SEAL heritage back to the Scouts and Raiders and Naval Combat Demolition Units active only during World War II,” said Roger Clapp, Naval Special Warfare Command Force Historian.

“They needed 100 volunteers for this demolition outfit,” said retired Lt. Joseph DiMartino, who found himself a seventeen year-old seaman on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944. DiMartino stayed in the community and eventually became one of the original members or ‘plank owners’ for SEAL Team Two.

“It was a lot of training, I mean we had a line of schools we had to go through and they were fantastic,” he said. “Like Ft. Bragg special weapons, you know all kind of foreign weapons, HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) parachuting.”

Back in the early days, the technology was not as advanced as today.

“We had swim trunks, blue and gold shirts, coral shoes and a K-Bar,” said retired Master Chief Boiler Technician (SEAL) Peter Slempha Jr., SEAL Team One plank owner. “The only weapon reliable in the surf was the .45 cal. ‘Grease Gun’.”

Slempha too echoed the rigorous training schedule.

“The training pipeline was hectic,” he said. “We attended Army Basic Airborne at Ft. Benning, arctic survival with the Royal Canadian Air Force, jungle survival in Panama.” In addition, Slempha said they received Vietnamese language training and other training as it became available.

Slempha added the caliber of personnel has not changed though.

“We were and are the best there is,” he said.

“Today’s SPECWAR SEALs are the best fighting force the armed forces have,” DiMartino added.

“A lot of people think we make SEALs here, we don’t, we find them,” said Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL) Daniel Gearhart, Basic Underwater Demolition / SEAL 1st Phase Leading Chief Petty Officer. “It’s like diamond mining, you gotta throw

out a lot of dirt and you gotta dig through and get your hands dirty and find SEALs, because you don't make them," Gearhart explained.

Gearhart is not the first member of his family to be a SEAL.

"My father was in Class 32, UDT 11 and Team One," he said. "I grew up around...all these guys back in the day were running around my house and are legends in the Frogman community now, guys that we all stand on their shoulders because of what they did. I grew up around those guys and thought it was kind of neat and the lifestyle was attractive to me."

Twenty years later, he's now imparting his wisdom to new recruits, drawing from the chiefs and senior chiefs who were in Vietnam who trained him.

"The student has changed," Gearhart said, "When I went through I was the norm. I was a young kid, didn't really fit into the college mold, and didn't really want to start a 9-to-5. I wanted more. And now the young recruit comes in and usually has a college degree or some college. He's a lot smarter, they ask a lot more questions, so the training has changed to meet what we need, but the rudimentary core elements of our training haven't."

Gearhart added while a lot of the training has evolved, it hasn't necessarily changed, and while some of the specific missions for deployed SEALs may have changed, the overall mission has not.

"We are the first choice when it comes to hitting the target. I think battlefield commanders want SEALs to do the job and they wanted them back then because they were the best at it. They want them in Afghanistan and Iraq now because they're going to get the job done," he said.

When asked for the fondest memory that he was able to share, Gearhart unhesitatingly stated: "The day I got my Trident, absolutely."

Instructors like Gearhart ensure the strength of the SEAL community for many years to come. The men who laid that foundation still find themselves missing the action, even in their 80s.

"It's just the way we were, the teams and the men, the camaraderie, it lives with you forever. You never forget your buddy, you never forget your shipmate, you never forget the team, you never forget the operations," DiMartino said. "I'm very proud to have been part of the military, part of the SEALs, part of Special Warfare and if I was a younger man I would still love to be back in there with them."